

How Does the Corona Virus Strengthen Authoritarianism in Hungary?

Borbáth, Endre

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Borbáth, Endre

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Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

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How Does the Corona Virus Strengthen Authoritarianism in Hungary?

By Endre Borbáth

Headlines on democratic backsliding in Hungary have become a recurring phenomenon in European public affairs, and the Covid-19 crisis has not been an exception. On March 30th, the Hungarian parliament passed a law enabling the Fidesz government to rule by decree. Unlike those in other European countries, the adopted emergency powers allow the government to circumvent parliament without an expiry date, and among other provisions, permit the criminal prosecution of spreading false or misleading information regarding the fight against the ongoing pandemic. Critics fear that the enabling law allows a government already notorious for authoritarian tendencies to abuse its newly gained powers. Some of the decisions adopted since the new law seem to confirm these fears: the government is using the opportunity provided by Covid-19 to severely cut the budget of political parties and municipalities, many of which – including Budapest – are governed by parties in opposition. Despite the current headlines, it remains puzzling what motivated the current escalation, given the governing party's two-thirds majority in parliament, a constitutional framework, and an electoral system tailored to serve its political interests. The answer lies in the context of party competition, where Viktor Orbán used the opportunity provided by the crisis to strengthen previous lines of conflict, and Fidesz' dominance in the party system.

While all across Europe executive power is entering center stage, citizens are expecting quick reactions from national governments, and public opinion polls show a surge of support for parties in government, the Hungarian context is unique in two key aspects. Firstly, there are very few countries where populist parties are part of the government as senior coalition partners and delegate prime ministers. Only under these circumstances, they need to unambiguously take responsibility for the success or failure of policies implemented to fight Covid-19. Senior government parties can not easily afford to use a science-sceptical rhetoric and downplay the pandemic's risks. Secondly, within the small universe of such cases, Viktor Orbán recognized the danger of Covid-19 relatively early. He closed universities and schools when there were just 19 confirmed cases in the country. By the time this number rose to 39, only Hungarian citizens were allowed to enter via air or land border crossings. This prompt response by the Hungarian government not only slowed down the spread of the virus relative to other Eastern European countries, but also contributed to a political atmosphere where an indefinite state of emergency seemed to be consistent with earlier measures taken to fight the virus.

Most voters seem to agree with the government that the spread of Covid-19 requires prompt responses from relevant authorities, which justifies declaring a state of emergency. By delaying and voting against the enabling law on March 23rd, during the first round of voting in parliament, parties in opposition found themselves opposed not only by the government but also by a substantial majority of voters. By not including a term limit, the crucial demand from parties in opposition, the European Commission, and the OSCE, Orbán was able to polarize the fight against Covid-19 and exploit a textbook wedge issue where – similar to the case of a border fence – he is supported by the

majority of voters yet opposed by all other parties. The divide strengthens Orbán's nationalist, as well as populist credentials by appearing as the one who protects the Hungarian people in times of a global crisis, as he is opposed by domestic and international liberal elites, who worry about checks and balances while Hungarian lives are at stake. The polarization resulting from not including a term limit serves the goals of the populist government in maintaining the anti-elitist, people-centric discursive divide, constitutive of its political identity.

This dynamic in Hungary shows that next to trust in government, identified by Francis Fukuyama as the new dividing line in the way governments fight the crisis, understanding the dynamic of political polarization is critical. Governments may increase their level of support by catering to the preferences of key groups within the electorate, even at the cost of alienating others. In this regard, what seems to be crucial is the capability of political leaders to link crisis-fighting measures with core issues in their political agenda. In his first radio interview at the outbreak of the crisis on March 13th, Viktor Orbán justified his crisis-fighting measures with reference to a "two-front war," where next to migration, Hungary needs to fight the virus. He argued that there is a need to close the universities because the "pandemic was brought in by foreigners," and in universities, the government "cannot separate the tens of thousands of foreign students from the Hungarians." Despite the small number of inhabitants with a migration background living in Hungary, maintaining immigration as a salient issue is a crucial element of the electoral success of Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party. Thus, the prime minister was able to link fighting immigration to the Covid-19 crisis and maintain the salience of the issue he "owns" in the eyes of his electorate.

With the widespread economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic already making themselves felt by large segments in society, it would be hard to argue that rising authoritarianism in Hungary or elsewhere is the most important consequence of the current crisis. Nevertheless, the events in Hungary should serve as a warning sign for the importance of accountability and transparency in exercising power, even under conditions where these demands clash with an urgency to act effectively. Otherwise, the virus will end up strengthening authoritarian and populist parties, at least the ones who are in government, and allow them to seize the opportunity the Covid-19 crisis presents.

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[Endre Borbáth](#) is a Visiting Researcher at the [Center for Civil Society Research](#).

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